FEATURES

# *The Year the Pandemic "Ended" (Part 1)*

A timeline of covid normalization in the US in 2022

By ARTIE VIERKANT AND BEATRICE ADLER-BOLTON DECEMBER 21, 2022

*CDC Director Rochelle Walensky at a 2022 CDC Briefing*

*The following piece presents an incomplete timeline of the sociological production of the end of the pandemic over the last year. In Part I, we look at the way elected officials*

*and the press were talking about covid and the new omicron variant between November 2021 to January 2022.*

*This piece has been adapted from* Covid Year Three*, an episode of* Death Panel *released earlier this month.*

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We are living simultaneously in the covid pandemic as an ongoing event, and as its aftermath.

On September 21st of this year, US President Joe Biden remarked to *60 Minutes* that "the pandemic is over," and yet the covid pandemic is still very much ongoing.

As of the most recently available data on the data from the CDC, in the first week of December 2022, 3,115 people died of covid in the US. In the last week, as of this writing, an additional 2,703 people died of covid. This is between 400 and 450 people dying of covid every day.

According to the same data, in the last year 255,361 people have died of covid in the US—a quarter of a million people, and more than two and a half full "Incalculable Losses," to borrow a phrase from the *New York Times* early in the pandemic.

And this is, obviously, not to mention the many other consequences of covid, among them: long covid, or the more than 10 million children who have been left without a caregiver because of the pandemic.

Since Biden's statement in September, many have challenged his assertion, and many more have wondered how it is possible that the pandemic can be "over" in the face of the overwhelming figures above. As we have written previously, the answer to this lies in something we have been calling, along with our collaborators on Death Panel, the sociological production of the end of the pandemic.

In other words, there has been a profound social and political process to naturalize the pandemic and its effects.

This piece presents an incomplete timeline of the key moments in US covid normalization throughout 2022. Our aim is to show when and how this normalization occurs; calling out when what's often presented as a novel insight into covid has much less to do with anything real and much more to do with what we'd like to believe about the pandemic. Or what people in power would like to believe.

A key component of that story is emphasizing that, despite its many assertions to the contrary, the Biden administration has failed to meaningfully combat the pandemic. Instead, they have taken the leading edge in normalizing covid and turning a collective responsibility into a matter of individual risk.

But just because the Biden administration and many in the media want to be done with the pandemic doesn't mean it's over. And just because they've normalized things like the end of masking, doesn't mean that these losses can't be won back.

Left to its own devices, the Biden administration would press for the pandemic to end without so much as passing paid sick leave. For that matter, far from taking this moment to recognize we have a profound unmet need in providing free universal healthcare (or, health communism), the Biden administration is actively about to kick covid vaccines and therapeutics to the private market and stop guaranteeing to pay for them at the federal level.

And while many of the Biden Administration's worst pandemic offenses were in some ways baked into our existing political economy of health, the fact that it would have absolutely been possible to mobilize for far less death, disability, debility, and immiseration during covid, while still operating under a capitalist political economy, is all the more damning.

**NOVEMBER 2021**

Let's set the scene.

It's the end of 2021. We've passed 800,000 dead; we haven't hit 1 million yet, by the official count at least. There are still statewide mask mandates in 8 states. Only 8.

By mid-November 2021, following a series of enormously influential op-eds and press appearances earlier in the fall, experts such as JG Allen have began spreading the idea that "one-way masking works," which would become the de facto slogan of ending masking.

Also prominent in the discourse at the time is the idea of "off-ramps." The *New York Times* writes "We Need to Talk About an Off-Ramp for Masking at School"; Monica Gandhi writes in The Atlantic that "It's Time to Contemplate the End of the Crisis."

On November 12th, 2021, David Leonhardt writes for the *New York Times*: "The bottom line is that Covid now presents the sort of risk to most vaccinated people that we unthinkingly accept in other parts of life. … [This] raises the question of which precautions should end — now or soon — and which should become permanent."

November 2021 also puts us within one year of the midterm elections. Some Democratic party politicians, like the Governor of New Jersey, start running focus groups. One of their findings, according to the *New York Times*, is that remaining covid protections galvanize at least one bloc of voters in their state to vote against them. Governors start talking amongst themselves about this. This will be important to our timeline when we get to February.

At the end of November, while many people are gathered together for Thanksgiving, as they have been encouraged to do by the Biden administration, the world learns of Omicron for the first time, followed by a more or less immediate spike in cases and deaths.

Despite this, a media narrative immediately emerges to insist the new omicron variant is "mild." The idea that omicron was milder than previous variants ultimately wouldn't pan out, but that doesn't stop people from running with the line for months, and really, to this day.

That said, the supposed "evidence" that omicron is a milder variant came almost exclusively from anecdotal comments made by physicians and virologists in South Africa shortly after omicron was named a variant of concern, when they were asked by press to comment on how they felt about the new variant.

One other fascinating piece of context: at this point, by the end of December 2021, the CDC's official stance on reinfections is as follows:

"Cases of reinfection with COVID-19 have been reported, but remain rare."

Despite the enormous prevalence of this supposedly "mild" new variant, between November 3 2021 and December 29 2021, 73,514 people died of covid in the US.

**DECEMBER 2021**

In December 2021, the Biden administration was still using the "pandemic of the unvaccinated" line, which would disappear briefly in early 2022 before coming back in a new form in the late summer. Here's Biden on December 21st:

"Almost everyone who has died from COVID-19 in the past many months has been unvaccinated. Unvaccinated."

It's important to understand that this line first emerged during a time when data on breakthrough deaths—that is, deaths in people who have been fully vaccinated, which is defined as having taken a primary vaccine series—was not forthcoming from the CDC.

In the fall of 2021, the CDC stopped reporting vaccination status alongside information on covid deaths. We were then––after about September 2021––totally in the dark regarding breakthrough deaths for the next few months.

However, in April, the CDC finally began updating one dataset on breakthrough infections and deaths again, showing deaths by vaccination status in a dataset that covers about 66% of the US population. In the remainder of this piece, we'll be citing this dataset when possible, and assuming it is nationally representative.

Given what we now know about breakthrough deaths, the month that Biden said the above line about covid deaths being almost exclusively among the unvaccinated, 29% of US covid deaths were actually in people who were fully vaccinated.

Breakthrough cases become so prevalent that even in the absence of information they become a minor matter of public discussion; Biden officials start getting questions from mainstream press outlets about whether they're actively collecting this information, and if they are, why it isn't being released.

What's important about this is that the CDC *was* collecting this information; they just weren't revealing it to the public yet and wouldn't do so until April 2022.

Here's Anthony Fauci on CBS's *Face the Nation* on November 28th:

> MARGARET BRENNAN: Why did the United States decide not to track those breakthrough infections? …
>
> FAUCI: It's a very complicated situation. And often the public doesn't hear yet in time things that are being collected. So there's a lot of data, clearly a lot of data, that's being collected by the CDC that people don't know about yet.
>
> MARGARET BRENNAN: But is there data being collected now in the

> United States about breakthrough infections that the public doesn't know about?
>
> FAUCI: Yes, yes. Yes. The CDC is collecting data, yes.

In a December 10th, 2021 press briefing, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky is asked a similar question:

> SERENA MARSHALL: Dr. Walensky, I’m wondering if there’s any plans for the CDC to change how they will be managing breakthrough cases and tracking those. I know there’s been a big call within the medical community to have more real-time data reporting, especially now learning, as outlined, that many of those Omicron cases currently in the U.S. are among the vaccinated.…
>
> WALENSKY: Yeah, thank you for that question. So we have many different mechanisms by which we follow breakthrough cases. One is through passive reporting. But we know, through passive reporting, we’re not getting all of those cases in.…
>
> And then we’re also tracking in numerous departments of public health. And over 20 departments of public health are now combining their vaccination data with their testing data with their hospitalization data. And that’s over a third of the population, and that’s giving us a really accurate view of breakthrough cases, both for two doses of vaccine and now for booster shots as well.

Suffice it to say, our speculation is that the White House and CDC assumed that seeing the prevalence of breakthrough deaths would lead to vaccine hesitancy and so they didn’t report them for months. Instead, they decided to keep with the “pandemic of the unvaccinated” line despite the fact that covid represents an ongoing threat to everyone in the absence of layers public health protections like masking and paid leave.

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If the CDC and other organs of the federal government had some idea that this was not, in fact, "a pandemic of the unvaccinated," there is no indication that they considered changing their messaging. In fact, it's at this time that the White House instead doubles down on this idea.

From a CNN report December 18th 2021:

> "President Joe Biden's top health officials came to an afternoon briefing at the White House Thursday [December 16th] with a warning—and a request. … Biden listened intently as the officials laid out the contours of a looming coronavirus surge that could accelerate rapidly, swamp hospitals and send the country into another bleak winter.
>
> Yet Biden's team also came to the evergreen-bedecked Roosevelt Room with potentially more positive news: Many of those cases will remain mild or even asymptomatic in vaccinated people—particularly those who have gotten booster shots.
>
> It was a message the officials urged Biden to deliver to the public in the clearest terms possible, according to people familiar with the session. Only by laying out the stark difference in outcomes between vaccinated and unvaccinated infections could the gravity of the moment come through.

That very same day, Biden says the following in a public address:

"For [the] unvaccinated, we are looking at a winter of severe illness and death—if you're unvaccinated—for themselves, their families, and the hospitals they'll soon overwhelm."

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The final major development in December 2021 is the abrupt shift from the long-established covid isolation policy to a much shorter one—just 5 days of isolation, down from 10—with the explicit intention of getting people back into the workplace quicker, whether they're still shedding virus or not.

There are many competing versions of where this abrupt change came from, but it helps to contextualize it with the discourse circling in the press at the time.

As noted above, by December, the idea that Omicron was "mild" was in full swing. Pundits were demanding "off ramps" to pandemic protections like masking and isolation. In early December, isolation guidelines begin to come into question as well.

The *Atlantic*, on December 7th: "Why Are We Still Isolating Vaccinated People for 10 Days?"

*Vox*'s Dylan Scott, on December 17th: "Does it still make sense for vaccinated people with Covid-19 to isolate for 10 days?"

On December 17th 2021, Ashish Jha—at that point about 3 months away from getting the job as the new White House coronavirus response coordinator—says in an interview with NPR's *All Things Considered*: "We do not need to be doing mass quarantining right now. We have kids across America at home waiting out a 14-day quarantine. Totally unnecessary."

Industry groups also get involved. On December 21st, the CEO and two other representatives of Delta Airlines send a letter to the Biden administration, asking for the following:

"To address the potential impact of the current isolation policy safely, we propose a 5-day isolation from symptom onset for those who experience a breakthrough infection."

December 23rd, "Airlines for America," a lobbying group for the airline industry, sends a letter requesting the exact same thing.

On December 27th, the CDC announces the change. Isolation time is to be cut from 10 days after initial infection down to 5. Ashish Jha calls the change "terrific."

Importantly, this change in guidance is broadly interpreted as a signal from the CDC that covid now lasts about 5 days, and that the new guidance on isolation timing was made accordingly. This is far from the case, as should be evident from the multiple administration officials, including Biden himself, who tested positive for periods longer than 5 days just this year.

Instead, administration officials are very open about this guideline change being made with the economy and workforce participation in mind.

On December 29th, Walensky appears on CNN to explain the change:

> Q: "So from what you're saying it sounds like this decision had as much to do with business as it did with the science?"
>
> Walensky: "It spoke to behaviors as well as what people were willing to do" … [that] "people would feel well enough to be at work"

In a separate interview, Anthony Fauci described the decision as follows:

> "There is the danger that there will be so many people who are being isolated who are asymptomatic for the full ten days, that you could have a major negative impact on our ability to keep society running. So the decision was made of saying let's get that cut in half."
>
> The CDC also runs an ad on social media and elsewhere around the same time, which seemingly emphasizes the guidance change without mentioning it directly. The ad shows a masked barista standing confidently with text that reads, "I'm Not Letting Covid-19 Take My Shifts."

So the Biden administration were very explicit about what the priority was here: doing this abruptly, in the face of a huge wave of infections, to prioritize economic productivity over people's lives. Not only that, as mentioned earlier, there wasn't evidence that people aren't transmissible anymore after 5 days—and instead, there's a lot of evidence to the contrary.

In January, we found out just how rushed this decision was. Here's how the *New York Times* said it went down:

> On the Sunday night after Christmas, Dr. Walensky called an emergency meeting of the agency's Covid response leaders. She told them the agency would shrink the recommended isolation period …
>
> The new guidance would be made public the next day, Dr. Walensky said, and officials were not to discuss it until then.
>
> Stunned, the scientists scrambled to gather the limited data to support the recommendations and to rewrite the hundreds of pages on the agency's website that touch on quarantine and isolation. …
>
> There was so little evidence for shortened isolation … that the "science brief" that typically accompanies guidance was downgraded to a "rationale" document.
>
> Some researchers bristled at being left out of the decision-making process and were enraged by the agency's public statement the next day that the change was "motivated by science."

By the end of 2021, over 825,000 people had died of covid in the US.

## JANUARY 2022

By January, the idea that Omicron is "mild" was more or less solidified, despite no real evidence that this is the case.

David Leonhardt ran a newsletter in the *New York Times* on January 5th titled "Omicron Is Milder," which he followed up with his declaration 17 days later that "Omicron Is In Retreat."

In spite of this sunny depiction of reality in the nation's paper of record,

69,986 people would die of covid in the US in January alone.

This idea of "omicron in retreat" was part of a broader phenomenon that held in the early months of 2022. This rhetoric argued that "cases were falling" or even "crashing" dramatically, even though cases were still at record highs—they were just "falling" in the sense that they were reducing from an outrageous peak of hundreds of thousands of cases per day. This idea that the line was trending down, even with cases still at record highs, was constantly referred to in the first months of 2022.

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The year started with a lot of activity. Added to the "mild" discourse was an increased drumbeat that "one way masking works," which at the end of 2021 had not yet been fully accepted but had gained a huge foothold by the beginning of January.

Some members of the commentariat went so far as to propose that, beyond omicron being "mild," we could also consider it to be "nature's covid vaccine." This led to one of the most outrageous headlines of 2022, with the *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages proposing, on January 10th, 2022:

"Slow the Spread? Speeding It May Be Safer."

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There were two other significant signposts ideas of early 2022:

First, that covid cases were now "decoupled" from deaths, and that we should stop worrying about covid cases entirely. Considering how the rest of 2022 is characterized by a substantial drop in testing, if you wanted to accuse someone of being a "lazy writer," you could call this decoupling narrative "telegraphing," or "too overt of telegraphing," but that's just what happened.

My favorite example of this is Ben Mazer at *The Atlantic*, who wrote a piece with the following headline:

"Stop Wasting COVID Tests, People."

Mazer argued that we were testing too many people, catching too many positives in people who were asymptomatic. Therefore, "Each unnecessary swab that you consume means one fewer is available for more important purposes—such as diagnosing a symptomatic infection."

Others leaned more specifically into the angle that we should no longer be looking at cases, but at hospitalizations instead.

Monica Gandhi published a *New York Times* op-ed headlined "Why Hospitalizations Are Now a Better Indicator of Covid's Impact."

Ashish Jha, still doing his work for free, tells ABC News in late December: "I no longer think infections generally should be the major metric. Obviously, we can continue to track infections among unvaccinated people because those people will end up in the hospital at the same rate, but we really have to focus on hospitalizations and deaths now."

This idea ultimately echoes the same conceit behind the CDC's mask guideline change to the "Community Levels" system, which emerged in February.

The second signpost idea was this:

In January 2022, the idea of adjusting how covid hospitalizations are tracked to consider those "hospitalized with covid" versus those "hospitalized for covid" is mainstreamed among liberals. New York Governor Kathy Hochul is among the first major Democratic Party officials to embrace this line, in new guidance issued in January. Previously this had been a fringe idea, where to cast doubt on the existence or severity of the virus, right wingers and covid deniers would argue that covid hospitalizations were artificially high; that people would go into the hospital for things like car crashes or broken legs, test positive for covid, and be counted as a covid hospitalization, inflating the figures. This wasn't true, but ultimately became adopted by some liberals regardless.

For more on both of these two lines from January, we would refer readers to an episode of Death Panel from that month, "Vaxxed and Collapsed."

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January was also, most importantly, a big month for the Biden administration's ongoing effort to downplay the pandemic.

On January 7th, Rochelle Walensky enraged almost the entire disability community and many other covid advocates by telling *Good Morning America*:

"The overwhelming number of [covid] deaths, over 75%, occurred in people who had at least four comorbidities, so really these are people who were unwell to begin with. And, yes, really encouraging news in the context of Omicron."

Not only was this line more or less a reiteration of the "pandemic of the unvaccinated" myth, penalizing people for having "pre-existing conditions," it was also a comment based on only 36 deaths in a larger study. (The MMWR this statistic came from can be viewed here). In other words, certainly not anything you should be making talking points around, unless your goal is to make sure everyone stops giving a shit about covid. Which was probably the goal.

January 13th, Kamala Harris is asked on NBC's *Today Show* whether, in light of an open letter from former Biden advisors, it's time for the White House to finally change up their covid strategy. Harris responds with the immortal words:

"It is time for us to do what we have been doing. And that time is every day. Every day it is time for us to agree that there are things and tools that are available to us to slow this thing down."

On January 11th, at a Senate hearing, acting FDA commissioner Janet Woodcock says, "Most people are going to get covid … What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function, transportation, you know, other

essential services are not disrupted while this happens."

The next day, January 12th, during a regular White House press briefing Fauci is asked to clarify Woodcock's comments; he says the following:

"[S]ooner or later, as we begin to live with it, what she was referring to is that virtually everybody is going to wind up getting exposed and likely get infected"

The next day, January 13th, Jen Psaki is asked some frankly rather softball questions on whether the administration should change course on covid, and responds:

"[W]e could certainly propose legislation to see if people support bunny rabbits and ice cream, but that wouldn't be very rewarding to the American people."

This light pushback from the press and from others ultimately doesn't go far enough in getting any kind of real course correction in a positive sense, but we do think it instills an idea in the White House that they *do* need to shake some things up if they want people to believe that covid is under control.

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Into all of this comes two notable pieces of media released by the *New York Times* before the end of January:

The first is: "How Did We Fail So Badly?" an interview by Kara Swisher with economist-mommy-blogger-turned-pandemic-guru Emily Oster and Ashish Jha (at that time still working for free, not yet hired by the Biden administration to run its covid response). In this interview Jha says Oster was right on schools, "more right than I have been."

The second notable piece of *New York Times* content is David Leonhardt's January 25th 2022 newsletter "Two Covid Americas." This newsletter in particular, and the accompanying *Daily* episode, spread widely. Leonhardt

walks right up to the line of saying that masking and other mitigations don't do anything, a position he's more explicit about in later months.

In "Two Covid Americas," Leonhardt worked with "global decision intelligence company" Morning Consult to gin up a poll on people's self-reported perception of their covid risks.

Leonhardt writes of his findings:

[T]he poll results suggest that Americans have adopted at least some irrational beliefs about Covid. In our highly polarized country, many people seem to be allowing partisanship to influence their beliefs and sometimes to overwhelm scientific evidence.

Millions of Republican voters have decided that downplaying Covid is core to their identity as conservatives, even as their skepticism of vaccines means that the virus is killing many more Republicans than Democrats.

Millions of Democrats have decided that organizing their lives around Covid is core to their identity as progressives, even as pandemic isolation and disruption are fueling mental-health problems, drug overdoses, violent crime, rising blood pressure and growing educational inequality.

It's a remarkable disconnect between perception and reality. A majority of the boosted say they are worried about getting sick from Covid. In truth, riding in a car presents more danger to most of them than the virus does.

At this point it's worth noting that, at least according to some reports, Leonhardt counts President Biden among his readership. (We have seen this assertion disputed but have not seen firm evidence that it is not true, and so refer to the Politico report linked).

Leonhardt also goes on the *New York Times* podcast *The Daily* to talk to Michael Barbaro about these ideas.

*The Times* takes this so seriously that they make this *The Daily* episode a two-

parter, under the title "We Need To Talk About Covid," Parts 1 and 2; in the second half, Barbaro interviews Anthony Fauci and more or less begs him on mic to personally end mask mandates.

From that exchange, with emphasis added:

> BARBARO: So we wanted to talk to you because it feels like we might be at a potential turning point in how we think about and respond to this pandemic, and *how we learn to live with it, rather than having it be a life-altering, in some cases life-dominating virus that people desperately try to avoid*. And a few things prompted that question in our minds. And I want to walk through them very briefly.
>
> FAUCI: Okay.
>
> BARBARO: The first is that at this point, every person over the age of five in the U.S. who wants a vaccine can now have one. And most Americans are now vaccinated. Second, *Omicron is hugely contagious but meaningfully milder than previous variants*, so *many people have accepted that infection is likely* in their life. Third, *the costs of our current approach are becoming very high*.
>
> There's a well-documented crisis of childhood education and childhood mental health, for example. And fourth and finally, you yourself said about a week ago that we're heading into a phase of this pandemic where it resembles — and this is a quote from you — "the infections that we've learned to live with," end quote. So given all that, let me put this to you very simply.
>
> *Is it time to perhaps start treating Covid a lot more like the flu*? And I didn't pick the flu by accident. Because statistically speaking, among vaccinated people, even among people 65 and older, *the Omicron variant of Covid seems to present less danger than a normal flu*.
>
> FAUCI: So everything you said is correct except a very minor, minor misquote of me.

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69,986 people died of covid in January.

Because we know now what we didn't then, we have that broken up by vaccination status as well, per the CDC data mentioned above.

Of those 70,000 deaths, 42% were fully vaccinated. Additionally, of those 70,000, 12% were not just vaccinated, but boosted as well. So assuming those are nationally representative, more than 29,000 vaccinated people died of covid just in January of this year.

By mid-January, there had been a total of 850,000 deaths. We had still not yet reached 1 million dead by official count.

However, by this point, 432,000 of those deaths—*more than half*—had now occurred under the Biden administration.

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*This is the end of Part I. In Part II, we look at the events from February to April 2022, when a barrage of policy changes put an end to the very last remaining mask mandates in the country. In Part III, we look at events from May 2022 to the end of the year, and the narrative and informational vacuum the Biden administration has cultivated on the pandemic.*

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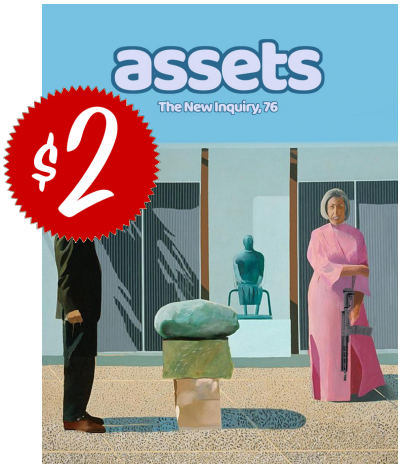


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